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FOOD STAMP
HANDBOOK
for
VOLUNTEERS

U. S. CONSUMER AND
MARKETING SERVICE
U. S. DEPARTMENT
OF AGRICULTURE

Its C&MS-77



VOLUNTEERS AGAINST HUNGER

You and your neighbors have an important role in the campaign to end hunger and malnutrition in America. By helping low-income people get and make good use of the food help available from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, you can contribute greatly to the lives of disadvantaged families in your area and thus to the life of the entire community.

American farmers produce plenty of food to provide every American with an adequate diet. The problem is to get it to all low-income people who need it—especially the aging, the disadvantaged, growing children, mothers, and unemployed workers.

For most poor people, food help is close at hand, right in their own communities. All but a few counties and cities have in operation either USDA's Food Stamp Program to enable low-income people to buy more food at their local stores, or the Family Food Donation Program which provides a variety of nutritious foods for local distribution to poor families. The goal is to have these programs available to people in every corner of the Nation.

Another part of the problem is to extend the reach and improve the effectiveness of family food programs in communities where they are already operating. Many poor people are not getting the benefits they should from food help now available to them. Whether it's because of fear, suspicion, lack of motivation, lack of transportation, or physical handicaps—there is usually an identifiable reason. A reason that can often be dealt with by concerned citizens of good will who can lend a helping hand.

Many individuals and private organizations have asked the U.S. Department of Agriculture what they can do to help, and many are already conducting well-planned service projects to help reach low-income people with the food assistance they need for better diets and better health.

This handbook outlines some of the ways you can help poor people improve their diets, and gives you information and facts about the Food Stamp Program that will be useful to you in your work.

GETTING STARTED

You can make a valuable contribution to the fight on malnutrition in your own community, by working individually or as part of a group. But first, find out all about the Food Stamp Program and what others may be doing to help low-income families with their food problems. Here are some ideas for getting started:

1. Get in touch with your local welfare department to find out about operations of the Food Stamp Program, and what volunteers can do to help. The telephone number of the welfare agency is listed in the same section of the telephone directory as other departments of your county or city government.
2. Find out what other volunteers are doing to help. You can get leads from:
 - The local welfare and health departments.
 - The listing of social service organizations in the yellow pages of your telephone directory.
 - The County Extension Service. The telephone number should be listed along with other offices of local government.
 - Clergymen and other church leaders, nurses, teachers, Head Start and Community Action Program leaders.
3. Make personal visits to volunteer activities to get a first-hand view and find out what additional help may be needed.
4. If you decide on a project that's new for your community, consider these questions:
 - What support can you get from others, including local officials and leaders of voluntary groups?
 - How does your project tie in with what other groups are doing?
 - Will there be overlap or duplication?
5. Find out if your area has a training program for volunteers. Is there a system to coordinate and direct their efforts? Can it be used for volunteers helping with food programs? In many counties and cities the welfare department assigns a staff member to work with volunteers so their activities will complement the work of the professionals. Major voluntary organizations also have training programs. Whatever the approach, there needs to be a way to provide information, guidance and direction to volunteers.

VOLUNTEER ROLES

In general, volunteers and community organizations can be most effective by devoting their capabilities and resources to activities that fit into five major inter-related categories:

- OUTREACH
- DIRECT HELP
- FOOD EDUCATION
- MONEY
- COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Here are things that can be and are being done by volunteers and groups of volunteers. They can be a starting point for you—then let your imagination and ingenuity find new and better ways of speeding and broadening the malnutrition battle.

Outreach

In Tappahanock, Va., a newspaperwoman who does volunteer work at a hospital seeks out patients whose illnesses appear to be related to nutrition and tells them about USDA food assistance that may be available in their home county. When they are discharged, she follows up and helps them apply for food stamps or donated foods.

Many poor people, because of isolation, suspicion, ignorance, or apathy don't know that food help is available. Or, if they do know, they don't know how to go about getting it. Informing and motivating the malnourished is a vital need. Volunteers can make door-to-door canvasses in low-income neighborhoods and housing projects, make assigned home visits to public assistance households, prepare posters, exhibits and operate information booths in grocery stores, employment agencies, welfare offices, health clinics, churches, neighborhood centers and other places where people gather.

Direct Help

In Adair County, Ky., a volunteer transports food stamp users to the issuance office in Columbia, and then takes them to the grocery store.

In Detroit, Mich., through a practice called "multiple proxy," a volunteer purchases food stamps for a number of elderly persons in the Herman Garden Public Housing Project.

Transportation is frequently a problem to low-income people, particularly the elderly and disabled, and those in rural areas. Volunteers can provide transportation, or they can

shop and deliver food to shut-ins or people who are ill. Other services might include baby-sitting while mothers get food stamps or shop, providing clerical assistance for under-staffed certification offices, helping to prepare meals for the children when the low-income mother is sick or hospitalized.

Food Education

In Ingham County, Mich., a group of about 100 volunteers have what they call a "family-to-family program." The volunteers help their assigned families in all facets of daily living, including housekeeping, money management, shopping, meal planning and food preparation.

Too frequently, poor people use the added buying power of food stamps to buy more of the same inadequate diets they've been getting. Food education in the proper use of meager resources is paramount. Federal, State and local public and private agencies conduct educational programs that need the helping hand and the know-how of qualified volunteers. Such educational activities are conducted at food stamp certification and issuance offices, grocery stores, neighborhood centers, and person-to-person in homes. In most communities, there exists the framework of such efforts into which volunteers can fit in many roles—including baby-sitting so the woman of the house can attend a foods demonstration.

Community Support

Federal food-help programs ordinarily operate through State and local governmental agencies. Therefore, public support and community understanding are vital. Volunteers—people who care—can find and point out the need in communities not yet committed to combatting malnutrition locally. The voices of well-informed citizens can spell the difference between an enlightened attack on a community problem and an illusory belief that there is no problem.

Money

In Yazoo City, Miss., the First Baptist Church set up a "care fund" for food stamp recipients. Contributions solicited from church members are kept in a separate account at the local bank. The director of the county welfare department is authorized to draw on the account at any time to help needy people meet their food stamp purchase requirement. No criteria are specified by the church.

The Lions Club of Jasper, Ala., maintains a fund to purchase food stamps in cases of illness or other emergencies that arise in poor families.

Money for food-related activities can be provided by voluntary agencies and community organizations, both from contributions of members and from fund-raising activities. In addition to direct help to destitute individuals and families, money can be used for printing outreach and educational flyers, providing food for demonstrations, and other information-education activities.

THIS IS THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM

There have been reams of information—and lots of misinformation—written about the Food Stamp Program. The program was made possible by the Food Stamp Act of 1964.

Here's what it's all about:

- The Federal Government gives extra food-buying power to low-income families who decide to spend each month a specified amount of their own money for Federal food coupons (usually called “stamps”). The face value of the total stamps they get is greater than the amount of money they put in. That means extra food-buying power.

Some terminology you'll hear: The amount of money the family converts to stamps is called the “Purchase Requirement.” It's based on the family's net income level and the number of people in the family. The difference between the money they put in and the total value of stamps they get is called the “bonus.”

- By law, the program is operated through State and local welfare agencies, even though food stamps are by no means limited to people on welfare. You may find some people who would qualify for food stamps but just won't apply because of the “welfare” implications. Remind them that about 40 percent of the people who do use food stamps are *not* receiving any public assistance money.
- Food stamps are spent like cash at retail food stores to buy almost any food the customer chooses, at prevailing prices. But they can be used only for food—no soap or cigarettes or other non-food items commonly sold in food stores. Certain imported foods, labeled as imported, cannot be bought with food stamps. But coffee, tea, cocoa, and bananas, although imported, may be bought with the stamps.
- What most people refer to as a “family” becomes a “household” under the Food Stamp Program. A food stamp household is any group of people who share food costs and a common table. A single individual can be a “household” if he prepares and eats his food at home—even if “home” is one room. However, an institution cannot be a “household.”
- It's the total net income of all members of the household that determines whether the household qualifies for food stamps. The income may be from welfare checks, pensions, Social Security, alimony, odd jobs, farming—the source doesn't matter. If the total income is “low” according to your State's standards, then the household probably can get food stamps.

What is “low-income?” Each State sets up “low income” standards depending on circumstances in different parts of the country. And they're different for different sizes of households.

It's against these State standards that the food stamp office measures the household income of applicants. The details of these standards and adjustments that can be made to

find the net income in your State are available at your local welfare office or USDA Consumer Food Programs office.

You can help the “head of the household” apply for food stamps by explaining the kinds of records he or she should take to the certification office. This can be especially helpful to people who are not on welfare and not familiar with application formalities.

Anyone applying for food stamps will be required to show—

1. *Where the family (household) lives.* All it takes is something like a current rent receipt, or a current driver’s license, utility bills or similar mail addressed to the head of the household.
2. *How many people in the household.* Usually, just the applicant’s statement, giving names and ages of members of the household is acceptable.
3. *How much income the household has.* This is the key in determining eligibility, the purchase requirement, and bonus for food stamps. It may also be the hardest thing to pin down unless the applicant knows what papers he’ll need. Pay slips showing wages and deductions for all working members of the household are the best records. If pay slips are not available, statements from the people the applicant works for are acceptable. Perhaps an elderly parent is part of the household—remember that this person’s Social Security check must be counted as part of the total income. Other kinds of income include veteran’s benefits, unemployment compensation, Civil Service or railroad retirement, court-ordered support or alimony payments. Most people have records of these—it’s a matter of remembering to bring them to the food stamp office. Voluntary payments or contributions from relatives can be proved by a written statement from the person making the contributions, showing the exact amount paid per week or per month or whatever the arrangement is.
4. *How much “hardship” the household is paying.* Most food stamp areas make allowances for hardships that affect the ability of the head of the household to buy food. Some cities have severe housing shortages that push rents sky high, and in these areas, part of the above-average rent may be deducted from net income, so food stamps cost less. In other places, there is little or no provision for free health care for poor families, and medical expenses may be a substantial deductible hardship. Again, if a working mother has to pay a baby-sitter, many food stamp areas consider child-care payments as a hardship. If receipts or other records of these kinds of payments are brought to the certification office, it helps to speed things up.

If you plan to devote your time to encouraging and helping people to get food stamps, you need to study the program in your own community. Get to know your local welfare director. Perhaps volunteer help with clerical chores or receptionist duties will be welcomed; this gives you an opportunity to observe and understand the problems of both the certification officer and the applicant. Many welfare departments have a special office to enlist and mobilize volunteer help.

FOOD STAMP RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The Food Stamp Program in your community didn't just happen. Officials in the Federal and State governments had to agree. The agreement sets out certain rights and responsibilities.

Every citizen is entitled to know exactly what these rights are.

Civil Rights

No person shall, because of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be otherwise subject to discrimination under the Food Stamp Program.

Plain enough? It means what it says. Food stamps are for all people who qualify.

Right To Privacy

All States have laws and regulations protecting the confidential nature of records and rights of individuals benefiting from food stamps.

Some of the questions to be answered in getting food stamps are personal. So the records are confidential, and are used only for making a decision on whether a family can get food stamps, and if so, how many and how much.

Right To Be Heard

Most welfare departments have some method of reviewing appeals by people who feel that they have been denied benefits unjustly, or are not being treated fairly. Complaints about certification for food stamps should be handled through the established welfare channels.

Complaints against food stores which are related to food stamps should be directed to the USDA Consumer Food Programs Office for the county or area.

Responsibilities

Food Stamp users must participate on a regular basis. They should buy stamps each month, although an unusual circumstance may excuse a skip.

Participants must promptly report changes which could affect eligibility, or purchase requirement and amount of bonus stamps.

These responsibilities need a little talking about.

Why buy coupons regularly? Because that's the only way the program can effectively "raise levels of nutrition." If a family eats well for one month, then skips two, food stamps won't be doing the job.

If they are off again, on again, then this calls for some explanation. If they're having trouble meeting the cost of coupons, then there may be some other problem. There may be some other service, some other benefit which would help.

Why report changes in number of household, or income, or rent, or cost of hardship? Because these are the things that can make a difference in the amount paid for stamps and the bonus. If the family gets bigger, they need more food stamps. If a member of the family leaves home, they may need less.

U.S. Department of Agriculture Role

The rights and responsibilities are administered by county welfare departments where there are Food Stamp Programs. But national supervision of the program is by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

This means that if there are justified complaints that the local welfare department fails or refuses to correct, there's another place to go for help.

In or near every food stamp county is a local USDA Consumer Food Programs Office; the Officer-In-Charge will want to hear about the problem and work to solve it.

If you can't find the local Consumer Food Programs Office, check with the nearest District Office (addresses are inside back cover). They'll tell you where the nearest office is and who to call or write.

It's impossible in this little booklet to say all there is to say about the Food Stamp Program, and how it applies to individual families. That can only be done at the local food stamp office or welfare office which certifies families for program participation.

That office will be glad to help you help others. So will the U.S. Department of Agriculture Consumer Food Programs Office.

Resource Materials

There are many good sources of material for use in community educational programs starting with the District offices. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has developed publications, posters, slide series, motion pictures, and exhibits on a variety of subjects. Some of these are designed to help explain the food programs to local leaders and to families who might be eligible for food help; and others are developed for nutrition and consumer education programs. Here is a list of catalogues of USDA materials and how to get them:

- C&MS-53 — AVAILABLE PUBLICATIONS OF USDA's Consumer and Marketing Service. Address your request to the Information Division, Consumer and Marketing Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. 20250.
- List No. 5 — POPULAR PUBLICATIONS for the Farmer, Suburbanite, Homemaker, Consumer. Address your request to the Office of Information, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. 20250.
- MP-1107 — COLOR FILMSTRIPS AND SLIDE SETS of the United States Department of Agriculture. Address your request to Photography Division, Office of Information, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. 20250.
- AH-14 — MOTION PICTURES of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Address your request to the Motion Picture Service, Office of Information, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. 20250.

To get information on USDA exhibits, write to the Chief of the Exhibit Service, Office of Information, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. 20250.

Also, there is a comprehensive Bibliography of Consumer Education materials available through the President's Committee on Consumer Interests, Washington, D.C. 20506.

Other good sources of material in your area include the County Extension Office, and your State Land-Grant College or University (which has the State office of the Extension Service).

For More Information

For more information on the Food Stamp and other USDA food programs you can contact the District Consumer Food Programs Office nearest you.

U.S. Department of Agriculture
C&MS, Consumer Food Programs
26 Federal Plaza, Room 1611
New York, N.Y. 10007

U.S. Department of Agriculture
C&MS, Consumer Food Programs
1795 Peachtree Road, N.E., Room 302
Atlanta, Ga. 30309

U.S. Department of Agriculture
C&MS, Consumer Food Programs
536 South Clark Street
Chicago, Ill. 60605

U.S. Department of Agriculture
C&MS, Consumer Food Programs
500 South Ervay Street, Room 3-127
Dallas, Tex. 75201

U.S. Department of Agriculture
C&MS, Consumer Food Programs
Appraiser's Building, Room 734
630 Sansome Street
San Francisco, Calif. 94111

